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Beyond the Canon:
Second Looks at Oft-Neglected Books

For most lovers of serious 'literature' – a term that now encompasses a vast number of works classic, historical, sometimes readable, sometimes less so – the problem of choosing WHAT to read can loom large. Long gone are the days when, with diligence, a large swath of the "greats" of "world" literature (meaning European culture) could be consumed. Too many other continents and their authors have crowded onto the scene.

Reading habits, of course, vary as greatly as eating habits at a buffet: some savor the singular flavor of each dish before passing on to the next; others enjoy the way each dish complements or clashes with its neighbors. Even on the plate, some diners eat all of one food group before touching the next while others eat sequentially, a slurp of soup, a bite of meat, a forkful of vegetable, in a continual circle. Similarly, some readers take on everything by a single author before moving to the next, while others jump about eras and genres in a less rigid manner. Both methods have their proponents – and in reading, at least, both have their drawbacks as well. The samplers can miss small delights while exclusively pursuing the great dishes, while the savorers can become so engrossed in the major and minor works of an author, an era, or a genre, that they have little time to pursue tasting much of what lies before them.

"Beyond the Canon", then, will be an occasional feature in *Crossroads* soliciting recommendations of works which might otherwise escape notice: not necessarily "great" works – or even great reads – but ones which illumine, challenge, and/or entertain – though not necessarily all together. With the increasing interest in using literature as a tool for analyzing cultural values, some guidance or hints from those familiar with what's out there will certainly be appreciated. There will be few limitations: Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* though well known goes mostly unread in its entirety. The same can be said of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Numerous early dramas languish anthologized but (for the most part) ignored. Washington Irving's series of biographies surely offer some valuable insights, if not into the subject, at least into the mind of the author and the attitudes of the times. And whether obscurely familiar (like Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*), lesser or failed (say, Mark Twain's *Joan of Arc)* or nearly unknown (like George Schuyler's *Black No More*), the right notice can prompt others to pick up the book and try it. *Crossroads* looks forward to your submissions.

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After Herman Melville – indeed, after the failure of Reconstruction and the re-introduction of Jim Crow – few works by white authors featured a black character. Mark Twain created Jim – though he is arguably more saint than human – and attempted to somewhat tackle race in *Pudd'nhead Wilson.* Steven Crane created *The Monster*. Still, William Stanley Braitwaithe, in his 1925 essay "The Negro in American Literature" which appeared in *The New Negro*, notes that beyond the 1891 *An Imperative Duty* by William Dean Howells (whom he mentions along with Joel Chandler Harris, George W. Cable, and Irwin Russell): "it is useless to consider any others [i.e. white authors], because there were none who succeeded in creating either a great story or a great character out of Negro life"

(Braithwaite, 33). As to Howells' book, Braitwaithe calls it a "shadowy note" added to the "social record of American life."

But Howells' small volume deserves a look, both for its sincere (if timid) effort to explore the race issue, by capitalizing on the then-burgeoning interest in evolution and genetics, and for the mixed messages his image-making sends. For Rhoda Aldgate – the half-octoroon female lead and love interest in the story – is sympathetically intelligent and honorable though laden with self-loathing once the hitherto concealed secret of her slave origins is revealed to her. Howells' narrative (through his narrator) contains numerous ambiguously objective comments which may in fact reflect the author's versedness in the accepted stereotypes of the time. As with Harriet Beecher Stowe, much unwitting insult may be found within the language of the work.

The story reads well – quietly and pleasantly in Howell's modest style – while tentatively raising some of the incongruities resulting from America's fixation on skin color and what it supposedly reveals about an individual. Rhoda, unaware at first of her mixed race origins, begins as an ardent liberal when it comes to race relations, though she can still utter fatuities like "Oh, I can't imagine a colored Catholic. There seems something unnatural in the very idea." Her sentiments turn into a fairly oppressive horror once she learns the truth about her parents, but by book's end she finally accepts her state – though she is quite reluctant to allow Olney, the doctor who loves her, to encumber his future life with a woman he can never appear with socially.

A rather disturbing, cringe-inducing scene unfolds when the newly enlightened Rhoda takes refuge in a black church and can only recoil from the congregation surrounding her:

> Rhoda distinguished faces, sad, repulsive visages of a frog-like ugliness, added to the repulsive black in all its shades, from the unalloyed brilliancy of the pure negro type to the pallid yellow of the quadroon, and these mixed-bloods were more odious to her than the others, because she felt herself more akin to them; but they were all abhorrent.

It could be that Howells himself is expressing a personal disgust, but as a realist, his exploration of her new awareness rings at least true enough that it reflects what many might feel when their sense of identity is violently overthrown.

Other scenes throughout this short (150-odd pages) work continue Howells' not-quite-daring efforts to scrutinize America's racial fixation. But as at least some of the focus of literary criticism is beginning to turn to cataloguing the values and attitudes promulgated by any era's works, *An Imperative Duty* provides an interesting example of the many books out there offering insights into by-gone but still prevalent eras.

We eagerly await the many surprises our readers have in store for us.